

VZCZCXRO5144  
PP RUEHROV  
DE RUEHTV #2087/01 1871433  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 061433Z JUL 07  
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2149  
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE  
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN  
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 002087

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/02/2012  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [VT](#) [IS](#)  
SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN INSTITUTIONS CONCERNED ABOUT ISRAELI  
PLANS FOR WALKWAY AROUND SEA OF GALILEE

TEL AVIV 00002087 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: DCM Gene A. Cretz for reasons 1.4 b/d.

[¶1.](#) (U) SUMMARY. (Note: See action request para 7.)  
Christian leaders representing the holy sites on the Sea of Galilee (Lake Kinneret) are concerned about a GOI plan to construct a pedestrian pathway around the lake. They argue the planned walkway would bisect their properties and destroy the atmosphere of holiness maintained at the Galilee sites. The plan received formal government approval in December but has not yet been funded. Nevertheless, the religious orders in charge of the holy sites fear that once funding is allocated, the plan will proceed with little consideration for their interests, despite their view that the Fundamental Agreement with the Holy See obligates the GOI to protect such sites. We intend to recommend to the GOI that it construct the pathway in such a way as to bypass the Christian holy sites on the northern shore, and welcome any input the Department may wish to add. END SUMMARY.

[¶2.](#) (U) In a May 22 letter to FM Livni (copied to the Ambassador and forwarded to NEA/IPA) and in a July 2 meeting with poloff, representatives of Christian institutions in Israel expressed concern over a GOI plan to build a continuous pedestrian pathway around the Sea of Galilee (Lake Kinneret). The GOI plan, initiated by the Society for the Protection of Nature and approved in December 2006 by the National Council for Planning and Building (but not yet funded), calls for a pathway to circumnavigate the lake no more than fifty meters from the shore line. The intent is twofold: to preserve the lake by stemming the tide of illegal private beach development along the state-owned shore, and to provide easier access to the lake for vacationers.

[¶3.](#) (U) According to representatives of the Roman Catholic-administered holy sites at Tabgha, Capernaum and the Church of the Multiplication (all situated on the Galilee's northern shore), the planned walkway would effectively separate these sites from their corresponding shore lines. In their letter to FM Livni, the Christian representatives argue that the contiguity of the sanctuaries with the shore is integral to the holiness of these sites, and fear that a public path would bring noisy vacationers, effectively destroying the atmosphere of prayer and reflection maintained at the sites. "Indiscriminate implementation of the newly adopted plan risks creating a permanent source of tension between the Churches and the State," they wrote.

[¶4.](#) (C) In a July 2 meeting with poloff, Franciscan Spokesman Fr. Athanasius Macora, Interior Ministry Director for Christian Affairs Cesare Marjeh, and Israeli National Police liaison to the Christian communities Saliba Saliba all expressed concern that the GOI would implement the plan

without further consultation with the affected Christian churches. Fr. Macora, who mediates Status Quo and Church-GOI disputes for the Franciscan custodianship of the Holy Land, said the religious orders in charge of the Galilee holy sites had so far been unsuccessful in their attempt to secure GOI assurances that the Galilee pathway would not transverse their properties. Their strategy, he said, was to rely on the religious argument that the sanctity of the sites should be preserved. He said the religious orders recognized they would lose any argument built on property claims because in 1996, the GOI expropriated all land within 50 meters of the shore.

15. (C) Macora, Marjieh and Saliba said the GOI could achieve its aims and ensure the sanctity of the Christian sites at the same time by moving the pathway inland at the small stretch of land that houses the holy sites on the northern shore, thus bypassing the sites altogether. They thought the law authorizing the expropriation and development of the shore line was sufficiently flexible to allow such a solution, but feared the GOI would not be concerned enough about Christian equities to pursue it. Macora said the Vatican was recommending they frame their concerns in the context of Israel's obligations to the Holy See under the 1993 Fundamental Agreement (FA) between the GOI and the Vatican, which commits the GOI to "continuing respect for and protection of the character proper to the Catholic sacred places..." Macora noted that the Holy See's chief Fundamental Agreement negotiator, Fr. Jaeger, had quietly helped to draft the letter to FM Livni.

16. (C) Macora said that the Churches were also concerned that they would be subject to more frequent harassment and vandalism -- already a periodic problem -- if the pathway is developed as planned. He noted that during Passover this year, the fence surrounding the Benedictine Monastery of Tabgha was torn down and property damaged by "NRP (i.e. religious-Zionist) activists." Saliba added that Capernaum

TEL AVIV 00002087 002.2 OF 002

was broken into and mildly damaged about two weeks ago. Macora, Marjieh and Saliba also stressed their view that the GOI was not behaving in its own interests by pursuing the pathway plan, because the damage to Israel's image among Christian pilgrims would inevitably impact tourism revenue.

Comment and Action Request

17. (C) We consider the overall intent of this project -- to protect the lake and preserve its shoreline as a national treasure -- as highly commendable. However, we agree there is a real risk the project could be implemented hastily, without adequately protecting the interests of Israel's Christian community. We propose recommending to the GOI that the pathway be constructed so as to bypass the primary Christian holy sites on the northern shore. We would welcome any further points the Department may wish to make. Please advise.

\*\*\*\*\*  
Visit Embassy Tel Aviv's Classified Website:  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/telaviv>

You can also access this site through the State Department's Classified SIPRNET website.

\*\*\*\*\*  
JONES